

WASHINGTON (AP) — Forty-four states lost jobs in April, led by California where employers slashed 63,700 positions, as the recession took a further toll on U.S. workers.

Trailing California in over-the-month job losses were: Texas, which saw 39,500 jobs vanish; Michigan, which lost 38,400 jobs; and Ohio, where payrolls fell 25,200, according to a U.S. Labor Department report issued Friday.

California's unemployment rate dipped to 11 percent last month, fifth-highest in the country. Michigan's jobless rate was the highest at 12.9 percent, followed by Oregon at 12 percent, South Carolina at 11.5 percent and Rhode Island at 11.1 percent.

As the recession eats into sales and profits, companies have laid off workers and turned to other cost-cutting measures, such as holding down hours and freezing or trimming pay.

Since the recession began in December 2007, the U.S. has lost a net total of 5.7 million jobs. The nationwide unemployment rate now stands at 8.9 percent, a quarter-century high.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and some economists hope the pace of layoffs will moderate as the recession eases its grip and likely ends later this year.

But even if employers reduce firings, the nationwide unemployment rate is expected to hit double digits by year's end. Employers won't be in any mood to ramp up hiring until they feel confident that any recovery has staying power, economists say.

In Friday's state report, Arkansas and Montana tied for the biggest over-the-month payroll gains at 1,500 a piece. They were followed by Florida, which saw an increase of 1,300 jobs. It marked a dose of good news for a state that has been especially hard hit by fallout from the housing collapse.

On the hiring front, North Dakota again registered the nation's lowest unemployment rate — 4 percent. It was followed by Nebraska with a 4.4 percent jobless rate, Wyoming at 4.5 percent and South Dakota with 4.8 percent.

Layoffs in manufacturing, construction and retail are common threads running through the states with the highest unemployment rates. Another thread: difficulties faced by South Carolina, Michigan, Rhode Island and other states, to lure new types of companies to help cushion the loss of manufacturing jobs and retrain laid-off factory workers for other kinds of employment.

Nearly 6.7 million people nationwide are drawing state unemployment insurance, the highest on records dating to 1967, the federal government reported Thursday. The crush has exhausted unemployment funds in California, New York and elsewhere, forcing them to tap the federal government for money to keep paying benefits.